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ITALIAN IMMIGRATION IN SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

By R. A. Clark

Note: The following contains excerpts from the upcoming book "Italians of San Joaquin County" sponsored by the Pacific Italian Alliance.

The Old Country

The Italian experience in San Joaquin County begins in earnest, as so many California stories do, with the discovery of Gold on the American River in 1848. Prior to that time during the 1830s, Italian fishing boats in search of better fishing waters were slowly working their way up from Peruvian harbors in South America to the California coast. Most of these sailors had come from the coast of northwest Italy which had a very active fishing culture and a man by the name of Matias Sabici is recorded as one of the first commercial fishermen to settle in Monterey. Fishing continued in the Mexican period through the 1840s and Genoese sailors continued to send word back to their families which were mostly located in the region of Liguria with Genoa serving as its capital. What these fishermen saw from the ports and bays of California's coast was a land very similar to their own homeland, sparsely settled and teeming with fresh potential.

▲ *The Italian Gardeners in 1911, only nine years after their founding. At that time their picnics only allowed men but they became an important staple of Italian-American life in San Joaquin County. (Courtesy Ben & Ellen Filippini)*

It is important to remember the Italy of this time was a land of independent regions and territories (often controlled by other competing European nations or interests), each with it's own traditions, dialects, customs, and behaviors. Often a persons loyalty was to their own geographic area, a phenomenon known as regionalismo (regionalism), rather than to a wider Italian culture or identity.

People considered themselves Genovese, Lucchesi, Piedmontese, or Tuscano instead of Italian. It was because of this regionalismo that many of the Italians who would emigrate to California have their roots in Liguria (and to a lesser extent Piedmont and Tuscany).

The long, narrow strip of land that is Liguria lies along Italy's northwest coast and it features a very impressive and dramatic landscape of lofty mountains, hills, and steep cliffs that plunge into the beautiful Ligurian Sea in the northern part of the Western Mediterranean. It is bordered by France to the west, the Italian regione of Piedmont to the north, and Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany to the east. It's four provinces are (from west to east) Imperia, Savona, Genoa,

▲ *This map shows the turbulent history of Italy during the time of its eventual unification. Notice the areas of Ligura, Lucca, Parma, Piedmont, and Tuscany along the northwestern coast. Many Italian-Americans in San Joaquin county can trace their ancestry to these regions.*

and La Spezia. The beautiful port city of Genoa serves as the region's capital and was Italy's busiest seaport in the nineteenth century (and remains so today). Other important cities of the region are La Spezia, Savona, Sanremo, Imperia, and Chiavari.

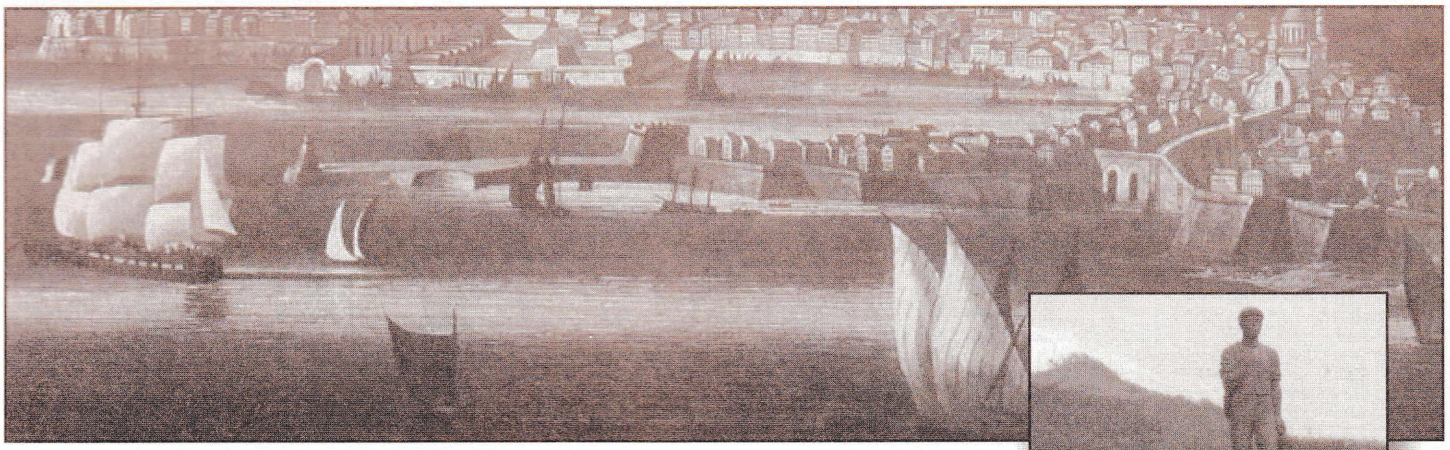
Liguria of the 1830s and 1840s was hardly an idyllic paradise. Years of strife in the early nineteenth century (including a Genoese uprising against the House of Savoy in 1821, which resulted in great bloodshed) had created a series of economic hardships for the people of the region. In addition to the constant political strife, cultivation practices and overpopulation had made the Ligurian hills barren and the topsoil had almost completely eroded away. The Industrial Revolution, seen as a boon for much of Western Europe, had almost completely passed Italy by.

By the time the news of the California gold strike made its way around the world, Italy was in a full blown state of civil war with forces trying to unify the Italian peninsula. A forced military conscription for males 13 years of age was put into effect, priming the population for the emigration that was to follow. With the incredible news of the great riches and opportunity to be had across the Atlantic, the Italians, along with nationalities and ethnicities from around the world, set their sights on California, the very same strange place their sea-faring relatives had spoken of years before.

A New California

In 1850, there were 229 Italians living in San Francisco and as the Gold Rush continued more arrived and began to move inland to Stockton and on to the mines in the foothills. Italians who had settled in the eastern United States also began to move west to California. The historical record is filled with the descriptions of people who came to California in the early years of the Gold Rush and found a wild land so very different from their own. But for those who came from the northern regions of Italy, it was quite a different experience. What

▲ *An unidentified family and a group of boarders share an 'Italian dinner' in Lodi. Family and community was very important to immigrants arriving in California. (Courtesy of San Joaquin County Historical Museum)*



▲ *A mural of Genoa in the Italian region of Liguria in the early 19th century. At right: People leaving Italy were an important part of life back home, often taking care of relatives left behind through sending money and other aid. This statue in Cicagna, Liguria pays tribute to the many people who left Italy in search of a better life.*

they found was a land, almost a home away from home, where rolling sun-soaked hills faded into a fertile grassy plain between cool crisp rivers. They found a hot, dry summer with wet mild winters and a rich fertile soil untouched by any modern agricultural methods.

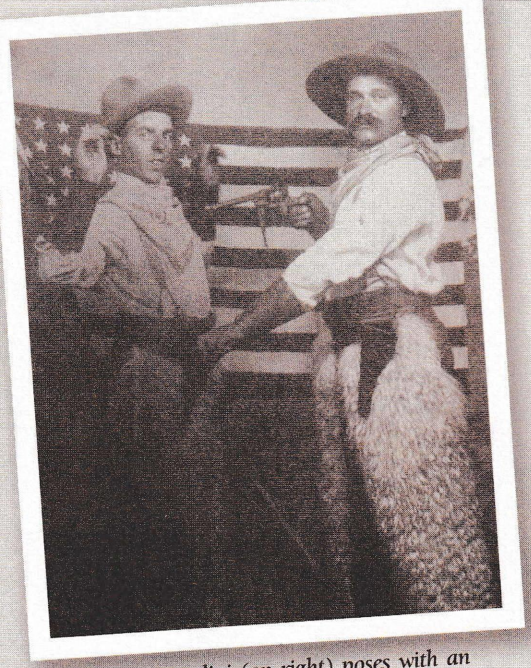
With the similarity in climate and the abundance of open land, the Italian immigrants excelled. They used their farming techniques honed over the centuries in Italy to great success and began to establish themselves in all businesses that Gold Rush California offered. Aiding the northern Italians was the fact that although they came from a very rural area, they were highly skilled and educated, and they brought with them knowledge of masonry, business, mining, finance, irrigation and agriculture. They also embodied a cultural entrepreneurial spirit that served them very well. For many new Californians, the goal was to "make their pile" and eventually return home, but for a significant portion of Italian immigrants the familiar terrain and climate caused many to stay and make California their permanent home.

As the arrivals settled in their new home, they sent back for other family or friends and often providing passage and eventually employment once they arrived, a process known as chain migration. Natives of certain villages or towns began settling near one another in California as they had in the old country. This village clustering, known as campanilismo, helped new arrivals deal with the culture change and the ethnic melting-pot that was Gold Rush California. In San Joaquin County the pattern repeated with the Toscanos (from Tuscany) and Neapolitans (from Naples) farming the wetlands, the Delta, and the Piedmontese, Genovese and (later on) the Sicilians going mostly east (in the valley). By 1860, the largest number of Italian immigrants in the United States lived in California (with 80% of them being northern Italian), and, as late as 1890, there were more Italian immigrants in the Pacific coast states than in New England.

It has been estimated that between 1861-1900, seven million Italians left their home (in the northern regions) in the first major mass immigration from Italy. Italian-Americans settling in the West had a much easier time than their counterparts who left later (the second exodus left between 1900-1929, estimated at nine million and primarily from Southern Italy and Sicily). They were able to assimilate much more quickly in California than elsewhere. This was due to the relative lack of prejudice against Italian-Americans in California, as well as their earned economic mobility. Italians made up the largest immigrant group in California for most of its history.

The Prominenti

At the close of the nineteenth century Italian Immigrants in the San Joaquin County had established themselves in all sectors of the economy and had achieved great success. These prominent members, or Prominenti, left a lasting mark on the county and the state. Perhaps the most famous and nationally known was Domenico Ghirardelli (born in Rapallo, Liguria in 1817) who originally immigrated to Peru to ply his trade as a candy maker in 1838. Ghirardelli sailed to California in 1849 after gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. He opened a store in Stockton where he sold goods and his chocolates to the miners. He owned several ranches around the new town of Stockton and



▲ *Giacomo Canclini (on right) poses with an unidentified man as 'movie cowboys' to show relatives back in Italy what the perceived life in the 'Wild West' of California was like. (Courtesy of Canclini Family)*

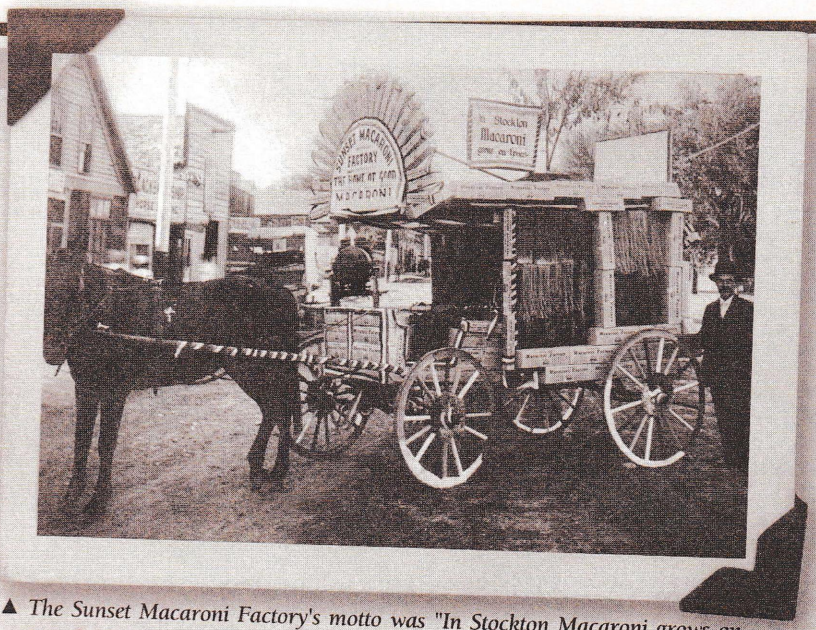
▲ *The Italian Gardner's Society held a queen contest in the early days. Seen here are contestants, mostly the daughters of members, vying for the honor of reigning over the celebrations. (Courtesy Ben & Ellen Filippini)*

▲ *Italian and Japanese farmers at the Farmers Market on Weber Avenue in Stockton in 1905. (Courtesy Bank of Stockton)*

▲ *M. Orsi & Company sold fruit and vegetables from his wagon the precursor to truck farming for which the Italian Gardeners were so successful and well known. (Courtesy Bank of Stockton)*

Gaetano Alegretti's (founder of the Italian Gardeners Society) grocery store and saloon circa 1905. (Courtesy of San Joaquin County Historical Museum) ▶

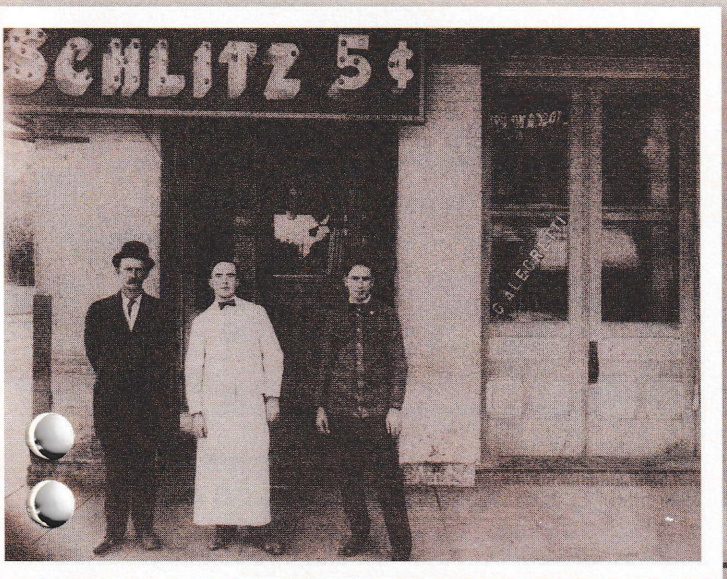
▲ *Gaetano Alegretti – The Father of the Italian Gardeners Society. (Courtesy of San Joaquin County Historical Museum)*

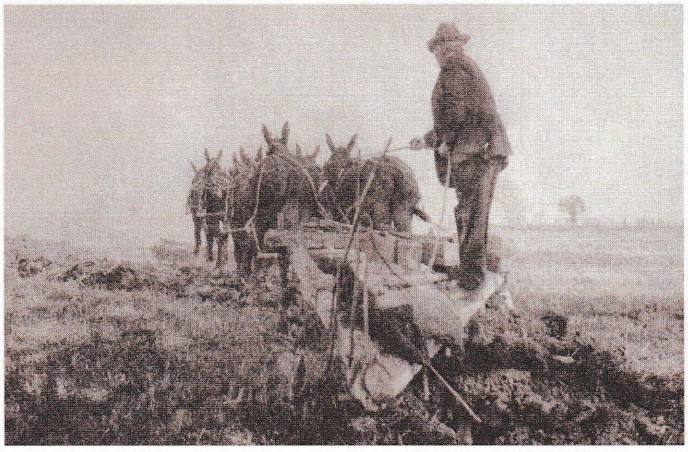


▲ *The Sunset Macaroni Factory's motto was "In Stockton Macaroni grows on trees." (Courtesy Bank of Stockton)*

▲ *Regina (Giovacini) Canclini works the farm. (Courtesy of Canclini Family)*

▲ *Postcard of the Italian Swiss Colony near Stockton around 1913. (Courtesy of San Joaquin County Historical Museum)*





▲ *Italian immigrant plowing. (Courtesy of the Sanguinetti/Prato Family)*

▲ *An unidentified Italian family enjoys fruit and wine under a grape arbor in 1912. Italian agriculture techniques worked extremely well in California which has an almost identical climate to that of the Liguria region of Italy. (Courtesy Bank of Stockton)*

was a very prominent businessman. A fire in 1851 destroyed his Stockton store and he moved to San Francisco in search of greater commercial opportunity but he kept his real estate in the Central Valley.

Nowhere has the Italian influence been felt greater than in agriculture with the establishment of the Societa Italiana Beneficenza Giardinieri (Italian Gardeners Society) founded in 1902 and one of the oldest organizations in the area. The society was originally intended to be a mutual aid society to help provide farmers in the community who needed health and death benefits. It recruited members regardless of their Italian region of origin and helped break down some of the campanilismo that existed.

Italian farmers had quickly planted gardens of various vegetables and fruits upon their arrival and these fertile plots eventually became known as 'Italian Gardens' which growers would harvest and take to cities and towns to sell from the back of their wagons or trucks. These 'truck gardeners' became a unique staple of the community and the gardeners dominated the fruit and vegetable markets in the area. Members of the Italian Gardeners Society formed the San Joaquin Marketing Association and applied for a loan to build a large Growers Market at the corner of Wilson Way and Weber Avenue after the City of Stockton passed an ordinance prohibiting the sale of produce on city streets in 1922. The driving force behind the establishment of the Society was Gaetano Alegretti who came to America at the age of 17. He made his money in the grocery and saloon business and was instrumental in securing the financing for the market and the success of the organization.

Immigrant Legacy

Once it became clear to the arriving Italian immigrants that they wanted to stay on in this new land, acquiring American citizenship became very important. Almost from the beginning the Italians pursued naturalization, which required a person to be 21 years-old, declared their intention to become a citizen, and have lived in the United States for at least 5 years. After they became naturalized, Italians strongly pursued their rights as American citizens. Even though the Italians had fully adopted their new nation, they never lost sight of their ethnicity and continued their connection with their homeland often sending back aid for natural disasters and providing money for extended family members.

Beneficial groups continued to promote the connection to their heritage and many modern groups

continue in this purpose of preserving and promoting the culture of those who risked everything for a new life. Groups like the Central California School of Italian Language of Culture in Stockton offer language and cultural classes for the descendants of the pioneers who settled here. The Italian School, as it has become known, has been offering classes since the 1950s and started offering its 'official' courses in 1974. The Pacific Italian Alliance, founded in 1991, "seeks to provide a steady culture and heritage program to our members through close collaboration with the Italian-American community groups and other cultural organizations in the Central Valley and Italy." The Pacific Italian Alliance continues their work of celebrating Italian heritage and culture through a full program of activities, educational exchanges, cultural events and publications.

The legacy of the immigrants from Italy has enriched San Joaquin County in many unmeasurable ways. Every business and industry has been touched, molded, and made better by this industrious group who came, as so many others have before and since, to make a better life for themselves. The fact that there are still farms and businesses within the same family is a testament to their heritage and culture.

▲ *Italian-Americans succeeded in all types of businesses not just agriculture. Here Bob Leonardini, Tony Borelli, and Sil Leonardini await customers at Squire Clothiers in the School and Pine Street block in Lodi.*

▲ *Bank of Italy building faced Hunter Plaza on the northwest corner of Main and Hunter Streets in Stockton. The Bank of Italy eventually became the Bank of America. (Courtesy Bank of Stockton)*

Authors Note: Over 180 historic images highlighting the Italian influence on San Joaquin County and its communities will be published in the book "Italians of San Joaquin County" which has been full sponsored and commissioned by the Pacific Italian Alliance.

Established in 1988, the Lodi Historical Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving, protecting and maintaining the history of Lodi. This year we will be celebrating our 25th Anniversary. The Society promotes and encourages an interest in the preservation of history, sites and landmarks in Lodi along with operating and maintaining the Hill House Museum. A journal of local history is also published. The Lodi Historical Society depends entirely upon grants and donations to support its endeavors. If you are interested in becoming member please call phone: (209) 369-8346.

The Pacific Italian Alliance is a unique cultural non-profit institution celebrating the wonders of Italy with a focus on the heritage of the many Italian families who have made their home in the Northern San Joaquin Valley of California. The Alliance promotes Italian culture and partners with the community, educators and the Italian government to bring the best that Italy has to offer to all generations. Since 1991, the Pacific Italian Alliance has served the community with a full program of activities, educational exchanges, cultural events and publications. For more information, please visit us on the web at www.pacificitalianalliance.com or call us at (209) 983-4375 for more details. If you're not a member, please join today!

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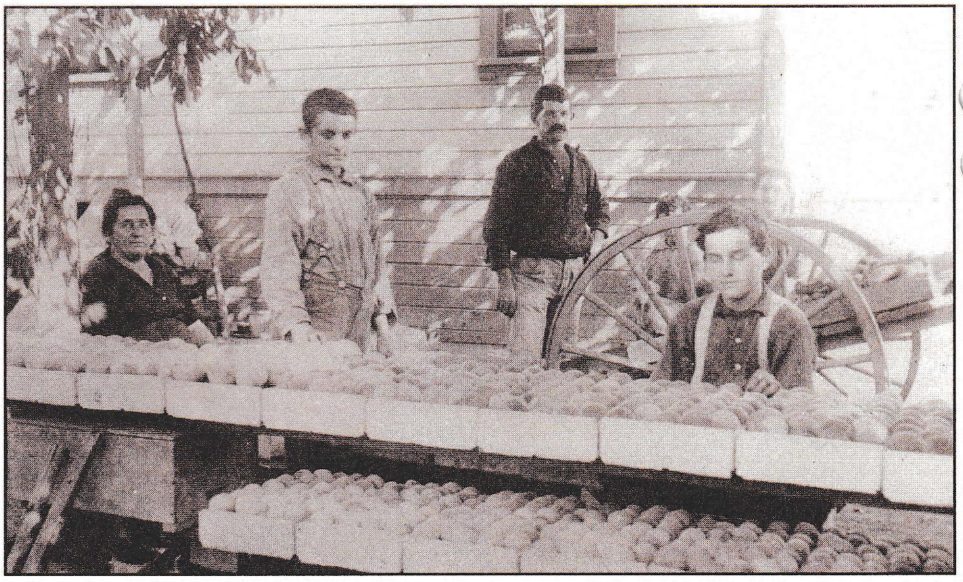

▲ *By 1926 peaches and apricots were the dominant fruit in California and San Joaquin County. (Courtesy Bank of Stockton)*

▲ *Sanguinetti Fruit Company in Lodi around 1955. (Courtesy Bank of Stockton). Inset: Sanguinetti Label – Box label for Flame Tokay Grapes from Sanguinetti Fruit Company in Lodi.*

◀ *A happy George Prato cultivating on the Prato farm. (Courtesy of the Sanguinetti/Prato Family)*